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Was John McCain responsible for the fire and explosions that killed 134 sailors on the aircraft carrier USS Forrestal?

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**From Truthdig October 7, 2008.**

**By Mary Hershberger.**

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magazine had ever run, a 12,000-word piece composed entirely of his unedited and often rambling account of his prisoner-of-war experience. Ever since, McCain has added compelling details at key points in his political career. When his stories are placed beside documented evidence from other sources, significant contradictions often emerge. One such case involves McCain's experience in the devastating fire and explosions that killed 134 sailors on the aircraft carrier USS Forrestal during the Vietnam War three months before he was shot down over North Vietnam. McCain has made claims about this accident that differ dramatically from parts of the official Navy report and accounts of reliable eyewitnesses.

In considering the 1967 catastrophe, it is important to note that the official report concluded that no individual bore responsibility for the fire or its spread. There are a number of conflicting accounts of the Forrestal accident, but here is the story as based on the strongest sources. The fire started at 10:51 a.m. Saturday, July 29, 1967, as 30-year-old Lt. Cmdr. John McCain sat on the port side of the Forrestal in his A-4 Skyhawk going through preflight checks. To his right was Lt. Cmdr. Fred White, also in an A-4 Skyhawk attack aircraft. A Zuni rocket on another airplane accidentally fired and flew across the flight deck, passing through White's auxiliary fuel tank and falling into the ocean. Fuel spilled onto the deck from White's craft and ignited. McCain told his biographer, Robert Timberg, and repeats in his own book, "Faith of My Fathers," that the rocket hit his own plane and knocked two bombs from it into the burning fuel as he scrambled out of his cockpit and raced to safety across the deck.<sup>1</sup>

There was, in fact, a single bomb — not two — that dropped to the deck. It exploded 90 seconds after the fire broke out, intensifying the blaze until it raged out of control. White and Thomas Ott, McCain's parachute rigger, were among the first to be killed instantly or mortally injured, along with most of the firefighting crew. McCain's plane captain, Robert Zwerlein, was one of those who suffered fatal wounds at this point.

A camera on the deck recorded images showing that the Zuni rocket struck White's plane. The Navy report later attributed the dropped bomb to White's plane, although the film footage does not seem to establish this definitively. However, McCain has

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Some of those who were on the Forrestal and other persons familiar with the ordnance told me that because the rocket did not hit McCain's craft, only actions by the pilot could have caused any bomb to fall from McCain's Skyhawk. These sources — who spoke under the condition that they not be publicly identified — agree with each other that, if any bomb fell from the McCain airplane, it was because of actions that he took either in error or panic upon seeing the fire on the deck or in his hasty exit from the plane. Two switches in the cockpit of a Skyhawk need to be thrown to drop such a bomb, according to the sources.

Whatever the circumstances of the fire's origins, McCain did not stay on deck to help fight the blaze as the men around him did. With the firefighting crew virtually wiped out, men untrained in fighting fires had to pick up the fire hoses, rescue the wounded or frantically throw bombs and even planes over the ship's side to prevent further tragedy. McCain left them behind and went down to the hangar-bay level, where he briefly helped crew members heave some bombs overboard. After that, he went to the pilot's ready room and watched the fire on a television monitor hooked to a camera trained on the deck.

McCain has never been asked to explain why he claims that the Zuni rocket struck his plane. If a bomb or bombs subsequently fell from McCain's plane as he has said, it seems to strongly suggest pilot error, and if a bomb or bombs did not fall from his plane, it suggests rash disregard for important facts in his accounts of the accident.

There is plenty more about this story that raises questions about McCain's truthfulness and judgment. In the first hours after the fire, he apparently did not claim to have been injured. New York Times reporter R.W. Apple, who helicoptered out to the ship the day after the tragedy and sought out McCain as the "son and grandson of two noted admirals," never mentioned him being wounded, although he reported on him more than on any other crew member. This would be an odd omission on Apple's part if McCain indeed had been wounded, given that service wounds are usually highlighted in such reports during wartime. McCain's own father, after seeing his son several weeks later, sent a letter to relatives and friends about the fire saying, "Happily for all of us, he [John] came through without a scratch."<sup>2</sup> A week after the fire, McCain made a statement in which he said that when he was on the

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went to sick bay to have his wounds treated but when he got there, a “kid” who was “anonymous to me because the fire had burned off all of his identifying features” asked him if another pilot in the squadron was OK. When McCain replied that he was, the “kid” said “Thank God” and died before McCain’s eyes. McCain said that experience left him “unable to keep my composure,” and that is why he left sick bay without being treated.

Lt. j.g. Dave Dollarhide witnessed that encounter because he was in sick bay, having broken his hip escaping from his plane, which had been immediately to the left of McCain’s when the blaze started. Dollarhide knew McCain and also the “kid,” a young man whom McCain knew well because he was his own plane captain, Robert Zwerlein, who was terribly burned when the first bomb exploded on the ship. Notwithstanding McCain’s dramatic account of witnessing someone die before his eyes, Zwerlein did not die then but instead was evacuated to the hospital ship USS Repose, where he expired three days later. On the basis of Dollarhide’s account, if McCain left sick bay without being treated it was not because someone died before his eyes.<sup>3</sup>

McCain’s actions after the fire show a determination to exit the ship as quickly as possible. When New York Times reporter Apple finished gathering his notes on the fire, McCain boarded a helicopter with him and flew to Saigon. Given that fires still burned on the ship and some of his fellow airmen were gravely wounded and dying, McCain’s assertion that he left the carrier for “some welcome R&R” in Saigon has a surreal air. Apple, now dead, said nothing in his news reports about inviting McCain to leave the ship, although he did report talking to him in Saigon later that day.

McCain does not mention receiving permission to leave the still-burning ship. Merv Rowland, a commander and chief engineering officer of the Forrestal at the time of the fire, told me that he had not known that McCain left the ship within 30 hours of the fire and that he found this “extraordinary.” Rowland added that only the severely wounded were allowed to leave the ship and that no one, as far as he knew, would have been given permission to fly to Saigon for R&R. McCain’s quick flight off the Forrestal meant that he missed the memorial service for his dead comrades held the following day in the South China Sea.

 **Not long after McCain left, the Forrestal set off without him on its somber voyage to Subic Bay, Philippines, where it docked to grieve and say a final goodbye to its fallen comrades.**

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ship a week later when it was docked at Subic Bay. There he gave an official statement and asked for a transfer to the aircraft carrier Oriskany.

Apple filed two stories about McCain's time in Saigon. Apple's first story said: "Today, hours after the fire that ravaged the flight deck and killed so many of his fellow crewmen, commander McCain sat in Saigon and shook his head. 'It was such a great ship,' he said."<sup>4</sup> Apple's second story was filed three months later, just after McCain was shot down over Hanoi. In that story Apple wrote: "It was almost three months ago that the young, prematurely gray Navy pilot was sitting in a villa in Saigon, sipping a Scotch with friends and recalling the holocaust that he had managed to live through. He was John Sydney [sic — spelling is Sidney] McCain, 3rd, a lieutenant commander. The day before, he had watched from the cockpit of his Skyhawk attack plane as flames suddenly engulfed the flight deck of the Forrestal, on which his squadron was based. 'It's a difficult thing to say,' he remarked after a long time. 'But now that I've seen what the bombs and the napalm did to the people on our ship, I'm not so sure that I want to drop any more of that stuff on North Vietnam.' "<sup>5</sup>

The record suggests that after McCain left the burning Forrestal for the greater ease of Saigon, he saw his Navy career as being in jeopardy. Soon, he went to London, where his father, Adm. John S. McCain Jr., was stationed as commander in chief of the United States Naval Forces in Europe. Sen. McCain has written little about the fire, and his book does not mention any conversations with his father about bombs dropping from his plane on the Forrestal or his leaving the ship. However, it is difficult to imagine that he did not discuss the tragedy and his own personal difficulties because, by McCain's own account, his father had intervened on his behalf before. After seeing the admiral in London, McCain went to the French Riviera, where he spent his nights gambling at the Palm Beach Casino.<sup>6</sup> McCain's book skips over the weeks after the Forrestal fire, but Timberg says that the young naval officer spent the months of August and September 1967 "unsure of his status." Following McCain's application for a transfer to the Oriskany, his orders were delayed, and in September he returned to his home in Jacksonville, Fla. There, an old friend, Chuck Larson, saw a change in McCain: The pilot was discouraged about his future. McCain confided to Larson that he might have to get out of the Navy because,

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had, in his short Navy career, crashed two planes and flown a third into power lines in Spain because of, as he put it, “daredevil clowning.”<sup>8</sup>

The investigation into the Forrestal fire was in the hands of Adm. Thomas Moorer, chief of naval operations and a close friend of McCain’s father. (Their friendship was why Moorer would personally convey the news to Adm. Jack McCain three months later that his son had been shot down in Vietnam.) Moorer gave the investigation to Rear Adm. Forsyth Massey, who handed in his report on Sept. 19, 1967. McCain received orders to report to the Oriskany on Sept. 30.<sup>9</sup>

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“He told reporters during his 2000 presidential campaign that his motto in those days was: “Kick the tires and light the fires [jet engines]. To hell with the checklist. Anybody can be slow.”<sup>11</sup>

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“Mary Hershberger is a historian and the author of [“Jane Fonda’s War”](#) and other books. She is a recipient of the Binkley-Stephenson Award, given annually for the best scholarly article in the *Journal of American History*.”

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## From cartoonist Ben Garrison.

“A guy in my neighborhood was stationed on the Forrestal at the time of no-names “incident”. He nearly lost his leg. When he came home he told the story many times. no-name was the cause according to him. I know this as I followed his career and could not get over the fact that one so foolish could go so far. I wish I could have Richie contact you but he has passed on. Your one talented and based guy and your work is really appreciated. All the best to you and yours,” (Name removed)

- 1. On July 29, 1967, the spoiled brat McCain pulled a prank and wet-started his jet while aboard the USS Forrestal. His mother lovingly called him a ‘scamp’ and it was well-known he was a practical joker and rule breaker. He finished near

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which led to more bombs going off from other parked planes, which then led to the deaths of 134 sailors. McCain did nothing to help during the fire. He was whisked off the carrier and protected because his father and grandfather were Navy admirals. The Deep State Swamp media has since tried to cover this up. They protect their own.

*UPDATE—I caught a lot of flak for the first one. Even some people who hate McCain like I do, they told me the facts show he did not cause the Forrestal fire. I'm not so sure, but I admit I could be wrong. REGARDLESS—he acted like a guilty man. He quickly left the ship with a reporter aboard a helicopter. He did this without permission and told the reporter he needed some “R and R.” So he spent several days in Saigon sipping on scotch and sodas. He missed the memorial for his dead shipmates. If he wasn't guilty, he certainly ACTED like he was guilty!”*

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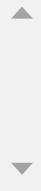
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